

23. Two Strikes

Chapter 23 titled "Two Strikes" delves into the intense period in SpaceX's history covering their early launch attempts in Kwajalein (Kwaj) during 2006-2007. It begins with Elon Musk and his brother Kimbal on the island for the first Falcon 1 launch attempt on March 24, 2006. Despite the pre-launch stress, Musk is depicted as being distracted with future projects, questioning his engineers about materials for the Falcon 5. This behavior exemplifies Musk's relentless forward-thinking but also shows a moment of disconnect from the immediate milestone of Falcon 1's launch.

As the first launch commences, excitement quickly turns to dismay when a fuel leak triggers a fire, leading to the mission's failure. Musk, visibly moved by the setback, declares their intention to try again despite the blow. This pattern of initial failure, followed by determination to persevere, is a hallmark of SpaceX's early years. Musk's response to failure is to dive into problem-solving, looking to hold specific individuals responsible, as seen when he initially blames engineer Jeremy Hollman for the leak due to a reattached B-nut. However, it's later revealed that the true culprit was corrosion exacerbated by Kwaj's sea air, absolving Hollman.

The narrative then transitions to the preparations for the second launch attempt. It details Musk's strategy of balancing cost reduction with risk management, highlighting his approach to innovation and problem-solving. Notably, Musk's willingness to accept calculated risks does not waver, despite the failure of their first attempt. This mindset is evidenced by the decision to use cheaper materials for certain components, such as the B-nut, and to confront issues like fuel sloshing with pragmatic solutions rather than costly overengineering.

Throughout, "Two Strikes" paints a vivid picture of the highs and lows that define startup culture, especially within the ambitious arena of space exploration. Musk's leadership style—demanding, forward-looking, yet sometimes controversial—is on full display, as is the resilience and communal spirit of the SpaceX team. Despite early failures, the chapter encapsulates a pivotal moment where the foundation for future successes is laid, underscored by Musk's relentless pursuit of space exploration and innovation.